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## “Home”

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Since my house and most of its contents were destroyed by Hurricane Harvey, I have been giving a lot of thought to the word “home.” Overwhelmed as I (and my family) have been by the loss of what my brother described as “a levee of trash,” and others, less charitably, have described as “a pile of shit,” I have been a little surprised at how easy it has been to let go of all that stuff. What has been harder, has been the sense that I have lost my center, my identity, my home.

My family and my pets were safely out of town when the water rose, and we were spared the trauma of watching the water come in, or the terror of trying to evacuate with pets and children through high water in the middle of the night. Stuck in the far northern suburbs of Houston, I passed the time frenetically filling out FEMA applications, texting my neighbors, watching the news, obsessing about what we would find when we got back to town, and stocking up on supplies at the closest Wal-Mart and home improvement store. In hindsight, loading 100 pieces of sheetrock on a trailer in a downpour might not have been the most productive use of my time, but doing anything gave me a sense of control over a situation I could not even imagine.

My tenuous grip on control evaporated on Tuesday, August 29. With major roads into and within Houston still closed by high water, my contractor (the word does not begin to describe the relationship I have with this man, who was, and continues to be, my savior through all of this) called to say he had made it to my house with a team of laborers and I needed to come home. With Google flummoxed by all the high water, and challenges with cell phone reception in remote parts of the area, my son and I set out with paper maps and sporadic phone calls to another friend who was guiding our progress through rural Montgomery County with a Texas map and a strong internet connection. Although we had to make a significant detour, with no one else on the roads, our trip into Houston was much quicker than we expected, and we pulled into our neighborhood at about 4:00 pm.

Although some of the families in new homes never left, we were the first flooded family to make it back to the neighborhood, and the silence was eerie. At that time of day, our streets are usually busy with dog walkers, kids on bikes, and random people taking advantage of our tree-lined streets to get in some cardio. But on that Tuesday afternoon,

the only activity seemed to be at my house. Our neighborhood of mid-century ranch-style houses just off Brays Bayou was badly affected by the floodwaters. Every original home took on water, from just a few inches on the edges of the neighborhood, to 3-4 feet on the streets closest to the bayou. Out of 146 homes, only 20, all of them new construction, did not have any water at all. Two or three others had only garage flooding. My house had almost three feet of water enter the garage, both the lowest part of the house and the side closest to the bayou. Based on water lines on the walls and furniture, there was at least 24 inches water in every other room of the house. The workers had already emptied the refrigerators and freezer of spoiled food, and had pulled water-logged sofas and mattresses to the curb. My living room sofa, on which dozens of visitors had slept, was the first thing I saw when we pulled up.

My contractor met us at the garage and tried to prepare us for what we would see inside. "It's bad," he said. We walked slowly through the house, with my son and I trying to take in the scope of what we were seeing. Most of the water was gone, although an inch or two remained in two of the bedrooms which seemed to have tighter seals than the other rooms. Some things seemed surprisingly normal. My kitchen table was still neatly stacked with paperwork I had cleaned up before leaving the house five days earlier. The hardwood parquet floor in my den, at first glance, looked unscathed, while the hardwood floor in the living and dining room had buckled and lifted by several inches. Our 1871 piano had water marks on the legs and pedal lyre, but the keyboard and sound board seemed untouched. Cups and saucers on the bottom shelves of my china cabinet were full of dirty water, but otherwise undamaged. The china cabinet itself, however, was warped and the veneer was peeling off the lower surfaces. Bookcases, which we had in every single room of the house, were soaked with water, and on at least the bottom two shelves (and in some cases higher), the books had swollen to the point where we could not remove them. My newly renovated bathroom, finished just 10 days before the storm, looked untouched. Until I opened the bottom cabinet drawers to find 14 inches of water still covering my hair dryer and extra toilet paper. There were still several inches of standing water in my daughter's bedroom, which was strewn with the detritus left behind when she left for college the day before the storm hit, all of which was now soaked with flood waters. The guest room, which contained several family antiques, and had also been the storage spot for all of the pictures we had taken off the walls in order to paint just two weeks earlier, still had several inches of water. Miraculously, we had power and working air conditioning.

The scope of the work to be done was overwhelming, and I found myself almost paralyzed in the face of it. To my surprise, the house did not smell, but all of my other senses were bombarded. Our workers were sucking up the remaining flood waters with shop vacs, tearing out sheetrock, hardwood flooring and paneling, and hauling flooded appliances to the curb. It was noisy and chaotic. Everything we touched was slimy from the flood waters. Our job was to pack up the salvageable stuff, but at this point, it was just me and my son, and I found myself literally spinning in circles, looking around the different rooms, trying to figure out where to start. The first, almost impossible job, was deciding

what was salvageable and what was not. But this presented another challenge. I had purchased bleach and gloves and garbage bags and sheetrock, but didn't think about the need for moving boxes to pack those things that we were salvaging. Nothing near us was open so I started texting friends in the suburbs, asking them to buy boxes and tape. In the middle of all the chaos, I got a group email from my department chair, asking for doctoral students to check in with her on our status. I fired back a quick message, saying that my house had flooded, and went back to the heart-wrenching job of emptying bookshelves that had held first editions collected by my late husband. We worked until dark, with me going from one room to the next, tackling one spot until it became overwhelming, then moving to another. As the afternoon and evening wore on, neighbors started coming home. My brother and two or three other friends arrived and started moving furniture we were hoping to salvage to the sunshine in the front yard to start the drying out process. By the time darkness fell, we were filthy, exhausted and overwhelmed. On some level, I was hoping we'd be heading back to the peace of our refuge on Lake Conroe, and neither my son nor I had even brought a change of clothes. Although I had the foresight to pack pajamas, I hadn't made a plan for where we'd be sleeping. We went home that night with my brother, who loaned us clothes and fed us dinner.

The next morning, I was back at the house by 7 am. Before 8, the first of the angels from the Graduate College of Social Work turned up, this one in the form of our Assistant Dean, who arrived with gloves, masks, and the increasingly necessary plastic bins, cardboard boxes and tape. As she was leaving to deliver supplies to other flooded colleagues, the chair of the PhD program arrived and started sorting photos and papers for drying. By mid-morning, there were more than 50 people in my house, from the crew of immigrant workers who were tearing the house down to studs and concrete, to the dean of our College and his husband who packed up my china cabinet; to the Hong Kong exchange students who were present every single day until the house was completely empty, and who thoughtfully pulled together a box of necessities for the apartment we would be moving into; to my Russian "child" who supervised the clean-out of my daughter's bedroom, attempting to salvage treasures from her dad and grandmother; to the faculty members who did demo work and packed up my office and counseled me on how to support my young adult children through the process; to the friends and complete strangers who showed up with food, including a woman who showed up with pizza and left with my laundry; to the dozens of people who took away bags of soaked clothing and returned it clean and dry. We were inundated with support that was much more powerful than the flood waters. Overwhelmed does not come close to describing my emotions.

I am a social worker. I know about trauma and grief. Intellectually, I had no trouble normalizing the grief associated with the loss of all of these material things. I can describe the symptoms of acute stress disorder, and readily identified them in myself and in my neighbors: nightmares, flashbacks, irritability, inability to concentrate, weepiness and increased emotionality. But I am a social worker. I do the helping. I am not supposed to need help. It wasn't just the profound loss that had me disoriented. It was the loss of a

fundamental part of my identity. I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't know how to accept help. I found myself dissolving in tears when a stranger stopped by with breakfast tacos, stomping my feet in frustration when I found our wet but salvageable embroidered Christmas stockings sitting on top of the trash pile, and shouting at people who loved me and had the misfortune of asking me what I needed them to do next. In quiet moments, and there weren't very many of those, my thoughts would turn away from the things that we had lost, and focus on the memories: the family gatherings; Thanksgiving dinners we hosted with international friends; the friends who took refuge in our guest room from natural disasters or family conflict; the welcoming reception for our dean and his husband; the birthday parties; the dozens of students who shared our lives and our table. Who was I, if I wasn't the one welcoming the stranger, hosting the homeless, supporting others in crisis? Overnight, I became the one who was homeless, the one who was in crisis, the one who needed support.

Within 72 hours, the house was demo'd down to the studs, and the second wave of work began: getting salvageable stuff to storage and moving what was left to our new apartment. Another round of angels appeared, arriving from out of town with fresh energy to unpack, organize, grocery shop, and pick out basic furniture. Perhaps most importantly, they provided emotionally stable shoulders for my children, and were present to help make my daughter's 24<sup>th</sup> birthday something less than totally awful. In what seemed like the blink of an eye, but was really more like seven or eight days, the possessions of a couple of lifetimes and the contents of a 3200 square foot house were reduced to a 10 x 20 storage unit and a very bare two-bedroom apartment. Treasures my mother had carted across the country, some dating back a century or more, were destroyed. First edition books collected by my late husband, hauled to the curb. Photos and albums from my own childhood, my daughter's childhood, my late husband's childhood, all gone. Mattresses, box springs, sofas, dressers, bookshelves, consigned to the pile of trash.

When you looked at the pile of trash, you would think there couldn't be anything left. But we saved the piano my great-great aunt was awarded in 1871 as a prize for graduating first in her class. The Noritake china my father brought home from Occupied Japan after World War II and the Royal Copenhagen dishes that my aunt purchased in Denmark following the war, were cleaned and now is safely in storage. An oriental rug has been cleaned and looks to be as good as new. Random pieces of furniture survived, including the kitchen table and chairs, and a couple of cheap card tables. Several chairs, including the antique rocker in which I nursed my daughter, are being restored. Pots, pans and everyday dishes have been washed and are back in use.

Three months later, the curb is clean, and the grass has grown back, but my house is barren and my neighborhood remains a ghost town. Half the time, I can't remember where I live and am continuously giving people the wrong address. At least once a week, I drive on auto pilot halfway to the wrong house before remembering that I don't live there anymore. My dogs haven't quite figured out this newly urban lifestyle, where people

wander down the street at all hours, and the footsteps of the upstairs tenant trigger cacophonous warnings of unseen dangers. Ordinary conversations become complicated as I stumble over simple phrases like “I’ll call you when I get home,” and I actually spend hours trying to figure out how to describe the places I live. Is “home” the place that flooded? Or the apartment where I live? Do I just describe the neighborhoods, without claiming the connection that makes a place a home?

I miss my house and I miss my stuff. I miss the king-sized bed where I could sleep comfortably with two big dogs. I miss my kitchen where I could, almost always, locate the utensils I needed to fix almost anything I wanted and didn’t need to make what seem like daily trips to Wal-Mart for a vegetable peeler, or a spatula, or a bowl big enough to mix pasta. I miss the doggy door that meant I didn’t have to play doorman for dogs who can’t figure out whether they want to be in or out. I miss the neighbors I’ve known for years, and walked with daily, and who are scattered across the city. But as the days go by, life has settled into something that seems normal. I love my apartment, with hardwood floors and big windows. I’m discovering that downsizing isn’t all bad, and I really can live comfortably in a space that is about a third the size of what I was used to. I love being back in the urban core of Houston, where many of my flooded neighbors and friends have also settled, where I can walk to church, and breakfast, and the grocery store.

But it isn’t yet home. Home is where I raised my daughter and foster son, lost my husband far too early, celebrated my mother’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, hosted so many dinners, study sessions, house guests, and international students I came to love as my own children. Where Thanksgiving dinner included friends from around the world, and my dad singing bawdy songs he learned while serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II. The place where Muslim and Hindu students from Pakistan and Tunisia spent Thanksgiving night decorating my Christmas tree with my Jewish foster son and Christian daughter. Where Christmas Eves included my Jewish son waiting for Santa with Muslim children while my Christian daughter and I attended midnight mass with their mother. Where one of those children woke me up at 2:00 am on Christmas morning asking “Auntie Ann, Auntie Ann, is it Christmas morning yet?” And whose first question when he saw my new apartment was “where will we wait for Santa this year?” The only answer I had for him then was “we’ll figure it out. Santa will find us.”

After a lot of soul-searching and number crunching, my family has decided that our best option is to repair our house, but not return to live in it. With the market glutted with flooded homes, selling now would be too much of a financial loss. Assuming we don’t flood again, my realtor friends tell me that the market will recover and we are lucky to be in a position to wait it out for a bit. Returning to the house makes little sense either, as my kids are finishing college and I am finishing a PhD. Given the vagaries of the academic market, there is no way to know where I will find a job next year. We no longer have the stuff to fill a 4-bedroom house, and it makes little sense to purchase all that furniture when I don’t know where I or my children will be in a year. So, we will stay in our apartment for the

moment. We will repair and hopefully find tenants who will love the house as much as we have. My goal is to have the house put back together in time to host one last party: a graduation celebration in May for my daughter.

The storm has unquestionably taken a toll. Without flood insurance, my savings has taken a significant hit, although I am grateful for FEMA assistance and the availability of an SBA disaster loan to help with the recovery process. I had planned to defend my dissertation in the spring of 2018, but dissertation research this fall took a distant second place to researching the various options for dealing with my flooded home. I have pushed back my timeline with a goal of defending in the summer of 2018. I continue to experience attention and concentration difficulties, and frequently feel like I can't keep a thought in my head for more than a minute or two. I have neglected friendships, ignored new babies and forgotten birthdays. The sound of rain, which used to be relaxing, now triggers mild anxiety. I don't get nearly enough exercise, as the gym I previously visited several times a week is no longer less than a mile from my home, and the neighbors I walked with daily are scattered to the four winds. I eat out far more often than I used to, in part because it is fun to try new restaurants in my new part of town, but also because every time I try to cook a meal, I discover something else that is most likely in storage, but most definitely is not in my kitchen. As is always the case after a loss, the holidays have been challenging this year. After years of hosting others, I was devastated when no one seemed to think about inviting us to share their Thanksgiving dinner. Rationally, I knew that many of the people who had been at our Thanksgiving feasts were neighbors who had also flooded, or students who had returned to their home countries, but nonetheless, I found myself grieving all over again. But we have figured out a plan to wait for Santa, who has graciously agreed to visit a few days early, so that we can have Christmas with our Muslim children and also with our oldest friends in New Orleans. The traditions are changing, but my family is surrounded by love and the support of our extended and adopted family and friends.

Unquestionably, it has been a difficult semester. When people ask how you get through a disaster like this, I think the only answer is "one step at a time." I am privileged in more ways than I can begin to comprehend, and my family is well on our way to recovery. I am looking forward to the day that I can return to my comfort zone, and again become the care giver, the social worker, and provide a refuge to those in need. In the meantime, we are building a new home and making new memories.

**Ann E. Webb** is an attorney, a licensed clinical social worker, and a Ph.D. student at the University of Houston, where her research focuses on the intersection of social work and the law, with a particular interest in multidisciplinary practice involving social workers and lawyers, and immigration issues affecting children and families. She has served as faculty on collaborative projects involving social work and law students assisting detained women and children seeking asylum. Her scholarly agenda is informed by her experience as a lawyer and social work clinician, and by her role as an advocate for underserved populations.